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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [LH](#)
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT, JEWISH GROUPS SIGN PACT TO PROTECT
SNIPISKES CEMETERY

REF: A. A. VILNIUS 292
[1](#)B. B. VILNIUS 277
[1](#)C. C. VILNIUS 258

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Damian Leader for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The GOL and local and international Jewish groups on August 26 signed an agreement approving conditions for the protection of a historic Jewish cemetery in central Vilnius and for the development of land adjacent to it. They had been negotiating those conditions ever since the GOL unilaterally declared the cemetery a protected area in May. Although the signing brought to an end more than three years of often acrimonious disagreements over the cemetery and surrounding land, all parties stressed that much work remains -- and much goodwill and cooperation are still needed -- to implement the agreement and give back to the cemetery its proper dignity and appearance. Not all Jewish groups are happy with the current process, saying it does not guarantee total and permanent preservation of the cemetery. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) During a meeting at the Ministry of Culture, in the very room where many of the same people had met on May 21 to begin their negotiations (ref A), representatives of the ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs met with leaders of the Jewish Community of Lithuania (JCL) and the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe (CPJCE) on August 26 to sign a protocol expressing support for the GOL's actions to protect the Snipiskes cemetery, which was Vilnius' main Jewish burial ground for centuries. The signing took place during a week when Lithuania is hosting a worldwide gathering of Litvaks (Jews of Lithuanian origin) and has hosted several high-profile visitors, including an Israeli cabinet minister and the secretary general of the World Jewish Congress. There also has been harsh rhetoric recently concerning the GOL's efforts on restitution of communal Jewish property seized by the Nazis and Soviets. So, GOL officials at the signing ceremony were pleased to celebrate a bright spot in relations with the Jewish community, which was nearly exterminated during the Holocaust and has suffered from decades of anti-Semitism. We, along with the British ambassador, were invited to observe the meeting.

[1](#)3. (C) The conditions for protection of the cemetery and development of adjacent property have not been publicized, nor do the parties intend to publicize them. Those negotiated conditions allow for some digging in areas outside the cemetery border, with provisions that all digging stop immediately if graves are found outside what is believed to be the cemetery boundaries. Some Jewish groups, including some based in the United States, are vehemently opposed to any digging near the cemetery, saying that because there is no way to determine the actual borders of the burial ground, the prohibition on disturbing the ground should extend well beyond what are believed to be the borders. Under Jewish

religious law, burial grounds and remains must not be disturbed and any digging in cemeteries is forbidden. The London-based CPJCE, led by Rabbi Elyakim Schlesinger, opposes digging in the actual cemetery, but is willing to allow careful excavation under rabbinical supervision in adjacent areas. Development will be allowed in areas in which no substantial remains are found. Rabbi Schlesinger signed the agreement, as did the chairwoman of the Jewish Community of Vilnius and the director of the GOL's Department of Cultural Heritage.

¶4. (U) Archaeological surveys indicate that the cemetery was active from the late 15th century until its closure by the Czarist regime in 1830. Since that time, several major events disturbed and largely destroyed the cemetery. In 1831, the Czar ordered construction of a fort on the north bank of the Neris River that destroyed much of the southern part of the cemetery. In 1901, an underground electrical station was built with several support buildings on the area.

Photographs from that area show that, while many parts of the cemetery were disturbed, a large portion remained intact.

Temporary buildings existed on the cemetery land during World War II. Construction of nearby Zalgiris Stadium in 1950 destroyed tombstones and graves. The Soviet rulers of Lithuania decided to destroy all remaining tombstones in ¶1955. The 1971 construction of the Vilnius Sports Palace and the installation of underground water, sewer and other utility services led to further destruction of graves in the area.

¶5. (U) There is no above-ground evidence of the existence of the cemetery, except for a monument on the southeast corner of the site. The area is now unkempt and covered

mostly with cement instead of grass, with two parking lots, the Sports Palace and two newer apartment buildings. The actual borders of the cemetery cannot be definitively determined. Maps and records from different periods show different boundaries. When it acted to protect the cemetery in May (ref B), the GOL created an overlay of all the known maps and used the most expansive boundaries shown for any point to define the area to be protected. It created buffer zones adjacent to those areas. The government's plan does not require removal of the Sports Palace, which is in the middle of the cemetery, and the two apartment buildings constructed within the past few years, which probably stand at least partly on cemetery land.

¶6. (U) The construction of those new apartments, the Mindaugas Buildings, first caught the attention of Jewish groups, and the embassy, in 2005. Since then, repeated efforts to resolve the issue have failed, and the Mindaugas buildings were completed despite GOL promises to halt their construction. The majority of the cemetery and adjacent land are owned by another developer, Ukio Bank Investment Group (UBIG), which has planned a much larger development anchored by a convention center that would be joined to the Sports Palace. UBIG has delayed its project pending resolution of the cemetery conflict (ref C), and is also giving up the use of some of its land.

¶7. (C) Rabbi Herschel Gluck of CPJCE acknowledged at the signing ceremony that some Jewish groups remain suspicious of the GOL and the local Jewish community, and do not believe that they are sincere about protecting the cemetery. He suggested that the GOL take action as soon as possible to provide tangible evidence that the site is being restored and respected as a cemetery. Removing the two parking lots, he said, would be a good first step. He did not, however, insist that the GOL close them immediately, acknowledging that doing so without first providing replacement parking areas could spark an anti-Semitic backlash.

¶8. (C) The GOL and CPJCE representatives praised and thanked each other for the flexibility and cooperation that led to the signing. They also praised UBIG; Rabbis Schlesinger and Gluck had met earlier in the day with Prime Minister Kubilius and Foreign Minister Usackas and urged them to find a way,

perhaps through generous planning permissions, to compensate the company for its losses in time and land. The government and Jewish representatives also noted the longtime efforts of the British and U.S. diplomatic communities to resolve the cemetery issue. They singled out U.S. Ambassador John A. Cloud, who left Vilnius just last month, as having been especially helpful and diligent.

19. (C) COMMENT: Snipiskes Cemetery has been a focal point of this Embassy's engagement with the GOL for three years and has prompted two Congressional resolutions. After several years during which Lithuania has been lambasted internationally for mishandling Jewish property restitution and trying to prosecute Jewish WWII partisans while ignoring evidence against Nazi collaborators, PM Kubilius, government, which took office in December, has shown by its actions on the Snipiskes Cemetery that it can do the right thing. If it follows through and takes action to ensure that the cemetery is fully protected and treated respectfully, the GOL might earn some goodwill, which it badly needs, from the international Jewish community. However, such action is not guaranteed. Opposition from Jewish groups who believe that actions allowed by this agreement will further defile the cemetery also could complicate matters. We will continue to monitor the situation and work with all parties involved for the best mutually acceptable solution. As all the signatories agreed today, this is only the beginning of the process. End comment.
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